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SUBJECT: LIBERIAN REFUGEE REPATRIATION ENTERS NEW PHASE

Classified By: REFCOORD NICK HILGERT FOR REASONS 1.4 B & D.

¶1. (U) Summary: Abidjan-based Refugee Coordinator (RefCoord) for West Africa traveled to Liberia from October 10-19 to discuss ongoing Liberian refugee repatriation efforts. UNHCR figures show that a total of 80,617 Liberian refugees returned between November 2004 and September 28, 2006 and that 140,460 Liberian refugees are still officially recorded outside Liberia, although UNHCR believes the actual caseload is smaller. UNHCR believes the repatriation effort is entering a new phase and that additional support is needed to encourage host governments to adopt a more active role in promoting repatriation. UNHCR plans to reduce staff where possible and consolidate project activities in 2007. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Abidjan-based Refugee Coordinator (RefCoord) for West Africa traveled to Liberia from October 10-19 to discuss ongoing Liberian refugee repatriation efforts. RefCoord also traveled with Political Officer (Poloff), Silvia Eiriz, to Bong and Nimba Counties on October 13-15, to visit several project sites. RefCoord met with officials from UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the American Refugee Committee (ARC), the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Search for Common Ground (SFCG), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and the Liberian Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC).

Repatriation Figures

¶3. (U) UNHCR figures show that a total of 80,617 Liberian refugees returned between November 2004 and September 28, 2006. The majority of returns is from Guinea (53%), followed by Cote d'Ivoire (20%), and Sierra Leone (19%). In 2006, only Guinea and Sierra Leone have shown a notable increase in return movements compared to 2005. Return figures from Cote d'Ivoire (2,656) are far below 2005 (13,498) figures and returns from Sierra Leone in 2006 have declined from a peak of 588 persons in March to only two persons in September. Ghana is only slightly up in 2006 (1,725) compared to 2005 (1,161). UNHCR reports a sharp drop in return movements in September as return convoys in Guinea were canceled due to poor road conditions and UNHCR's efforts to merge camps in the Nzerekore region.

¶4. (U) UNHCR reports there are 140,460 Liberian refugees still officially recorded outside Liberia. Large refugee populations remain in Cote d'Ivoire (37,700), Ghana (37,191), and Guinea (30,060). A recent verification exercise in

Sierra Leone resulted in a drop of the official figure by more than 12,000 persons to 28,399. UNHCR considers most of these refugees to be "spontaneous returns" and has deregistered in Liberia just over 4,000 refugees from Sierra Leone. UNHCR is currently conducting a verification exercise in the camps in Guinea. Mengesha Kebede, UNHCR Representative in Monrovia, expects the official Guinea figure to drop by at least 10,000 once the exercise is completed.

Repatriation Enters a New Phase

¶15. (U) Kebede told Refcoord he believes Liberian repatriation has entered a new phase, where the rapidly declining refugee caseload in host countries is beginning to strain long-standing assistance and employment levels with host governments, NGO partners, and even UNHCR staff. Kebede quoted one refugee in Ghana as saying, "you should thank me, if I go back to Liberia, you won't have a job." Kebede believes many officials are reluctant to see refugees return too fast, fearing for their own livelihoods in the process. He cited the example of an official from Sierra Leone who recently reported that Liberians could stay in Sierra Leone as long as they wished before returning to Liberia. Kebede believes Sierra Leone should move to a local integration phase for refugees if that is the case. Kebede highlighted efforts undertaken by the UNHCR Representative in Conakry and the UNHCR Head of Field Office in Kissidougou to establish clear deadlines with refugees on the termination of education and health services in the camps, to provide continual information on assistance in Liberia, and to garner the government of Guinea's support to promote local integration as a durable solution alongside repatriation.

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The Ghana Factor

¶16. (C) In contrast to the approach taken in Guinea, Kebede said the Governments of Ghana and Liberia are encouraging UNHCR to extend the repatriation deadline for the Buduburam Camp refugees from June 2007 to June 2009 and to increase their return assistance package. Wheatonia Barnes, Executive Director of LRRRC, suggested to RefCoord the refugees in Buduburam are particularly well educated and should be offered an additional four months food distribution upon return to Liberia, bringing their overall food assistance to eight months. Kebede said that at least two Liberian ministers, the Minister of Internal Affairs and the Minister of Education, have relatives in Buduburam, and said the Minister of Internal Affairs had confessed to him that his relatives had even returned to the camp from a recent trip to the U.S., presumably on tourist visas. Even more incredible, Kebede said the Minister of Health had sent a newly trained staff member from the Phebe Clinic in Bong County to the Buduburam Camp to work on HIV/AIDS activities. Kebede said UNHCR staff in Accra appear reluctant to prod their government counterparts to promote repatriation more actively and are resisting his own recommendations to conduct a verification exercise in Buduburam sooner rather than later. Moreover, Kebede believes many of the Buduburam refugees are actually Liberians holding refugee cards left behind by persons who have already returned to Liberia.

¶17. (U) Kebede said he could not establish different criteria for refugees in Buduburam based on their social status and explained the governments of Liberia and Ghana do not realize the costs needed to maintain reception infrastructure in Liberia until June 2009 make such a proposal unrealistic. Kebede requested PRM's encouragement to UNHCR and with host governments (Sierra Leone, Ghana) to encourage them to adopt what he called the "Guinea model" (i.e., establish clear deadlines and support local integration) and to push for a verification exercise in Ghana

as soon as possible.

UNHCR'S Plans for 2007

¶8. (U) Kebede said UNHCR's priorities for 2007 are to reduce staffing where possible and to consolidate projects started in 2006. He said UNHCR's plans are to pull out at some point in 2008 from most operational roles and to take on a more traditional profile by then. For example, UNHCR will reduce their staffing levels in Bong County where they do not expect many more returns, and will concentrate on turning as many activities as possible over to local authorities. In Nimba, where UNHCR still expects some 15,000 refugees to return, they will maintain staffing levels but will not launch any new construction or rehabilitation projects unless absolutely necessary. UNHCR also plans to channel more resources to support vocational training opportunities for returnees as they are doing at their computer training centers in Monrovia.

Education

¶9. (U) Although the Liberian Ministry of Education (MOE) recently announced that primary education is free and compulsory for all children, many refugees complain they cannot afford to pay for the required school uniforms and registration fees. Indeed, the Balama Town School Principal in Bong Country informed Refcoord and Poloff that he is refusing to allow children into school whose parents do not pay the various fees. He explained that many teachers are volunteers and that the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) had established fees in order to cover some costs for supplies and teacher salaries. He complained that although education was supposed to be free, the government is not providing the required resources to cover their costs. Parents at the Mempha School in Nimba County said some of those who could not afford the fees had even sent their children to the school in the Saclepea refugee camp because it was free.

¶10. (U) Still, UNHCR points out that focusing on enrollment as a sign of success at the expense of making improvements in the quality of education should be avoided. UNHCR plans to assist the Ministry of Education identify qualified teachers to move out to rural areas and help schools acquire textbooks and other needed learning materials in 2007. Although the

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above examples show that some children are being negatively affected by the decisions of some school leaders, there was no indication that recent returnees are bearing the brunt of these decisions. In fact, refugee returns to both Nimba and Bong Counties are relatively low compared to other counties. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable that increasing student enrollment and improving the quality of education are both equally important goals.

Rule of Law

¶11. (C) Refcoord and Poloff also met the Magistrate in the District Court in Saclepea to discuss the challenges he faces. The Magistrate reported there had been only three reported rape cases since the middle of the summer in his District, but appeared confused by our questions as to whether or not rape is an underreported crime. He had also never seen a copy of the Amendment to the Rape Law adopted in January 2006 and complained that they had no arresting officer in his District, no defense council, and no secure jail facility. As part of UNHCR's protection responsibilities, they have greed to rebuild the local police station and a etention cell for suspected criminals. Although iberia is slowly putting a police force together, many agencies point out that the police do not hav the necessary means to carry-out their jobs, such as

transportation. Numbers are also a problem. For example, the Liberian police force in Lofa County reportedly has fewer than 70 officers for a population of more than 300,000. UN agencies and NGOs Refcoord spoke to all agreed that improving the ability to arrest, prosecute, and safely detain perpetrators of sexual violence was a key protection priority in the coming year.

Food Security Report Issued

¶12. (U) UN agencies issued their "Comprehensive Food Security and Nutrition Survey (CFSNS)" for Liberia on October ¶11. The report concludes that recent returnees are more likely to be "food insecure" (this expression generally refers to having access to healthful foods) than families that returned more than one year ago. Louis Imbleau, WFP Representative, said that although returnees (both IDPs and refugees) are more likely to be food insecure, returning refugees are also the least likely group to show high levels of malnutrition thanks to the feeding programs they enjoyed in the refugee camps. He pointed out that they are also likely to see an increase in malnutrition rates as they reintegrate in Liberia, but agreed that a one year period seems a reasonable time-frame for returnees to adjust.

Comment

¶13. (U) UNHCR continues to play a strong leadership role among UN agencies and NGOs in Liberia and has made important strides in meeting both their refugee repatriation and Protection Cluster responsibilities. There is reasonable evidence to believe official figures on refugees in several host countries are high, and verification exercises in these areas would help UNHCR grasp their real caseload still in need of assistance. Reluctance by the host government in some countries to support the full range of durable solutions, particularly local integration, also seems to be as much of a factor encouraging refugees to wait as any other particular issue. Clearly, however, UNHCR will not have the financial resources necessary to extend their deadlines indefinitely. RefCoord recommends PRM give consideration to UNHCR Monrovia's request that PRM stress to UNHCR and their government counterparts in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone the financial constraints to extending deadlines for Liberian refugees and the benefits of moving to local integration in host countries as appropriate. UNHCR should also be encouraged to conduct a verification exercise in Buduburam Camp to determine the true size of the legitimate camp population as early as possible.

Hooks